

Review: Tito and the Birds

“Tito and the Birds” is an animation masterpiece that uses vibrant storybook-like visuals to depict serious, dark themes that are prevalent in the adult world. This 73-minute Brazilian film from directors Gustavo Steinberg, Gabriel Bitar and Andre Catoto follows a group of brave kids as they embark on a high-stake mission to save their society from a disease spreading through the fearmongering media.

Tito is a curious and optimistic kid with a passion to follow in his father’s footsteps and become an inventor. His father, Dr. Rufus, is on the brink of inventing a machine that will allow humans to regain their ability to communicate with birds, who have served as humanity’s best messengers for impending danger throughout history. But after a mechanical malfunction sends Tito to the hospital, Tito’s mother Rosa forces Dr. Rufus out of the house.

Picking up four years later, Dr. Rufus has been mostly absent from Tito’s life and Rosa has become an increasingly nervous and overprotective mother. When a disease begins to spread, known as The Outbreak, Tito, along with his friends Buiu, Sarah, and wealthy, arrogant schoolmate Teo, must rebuild his father’s machine in order to find a cure using the avian language.

Once infected with The Outbreak, victims’ eyes bulge out, their limbs become numb and shrink, and eventually they devolve into a sort of immobile rock. This visualizes the often-invisible paralyzing feeling of a panic attack through exaggerated physical symptoms.

The panic is brought upon by interacting with someone who is infected, but the source of the disease can be traced back to the media. Alair Souza, a wealthy TV-personality and father to Teo, serves as the main antagonist of the film. As a pundit, he infects viewers with a distorted image of reality that feeds into their fears. He is profiting off the paranoia he is creating by persuading people to move into his new housing development, Dome Garden, an enclosed community removed from the dangers of the outside world. This mass hysteria mirrors today’s familiar feeling of constant, inescapable news broadcasted on television and smart

phones. In the age of anxiety, the bad news that dominates conversation has disabling effects on many people.

The film also touches on racism and classism by depicting a diverse range of skin tones for the characters and showing contrasting realities of Buiu, Tito's life-long friend and son of his nanny, and Teo. Buiu has already sunken eyes, goes to a different school, is mostly silent throughout the film and is not allowed to enter Teo's extravagant mansion.

While there are many gaps in the plot and leaps in logic, the film is successful in addressing these mature themes and presenting them in a way that children can absorb. The breath-taking oil-painted scenes and simple drawings of characters give the movie a unique storybook feel. The dystopian cityscape has a balance of illuminated warm colors and cooler tones highlight the hope and fear that thematically tie the film together. There is also a diverse array of shots from all angles and perspectives that bring the energy of a live-action. The stunning visuals are accompanied by a beautiful score that carries the tone by emphasizing the blithe and tense moments throughout the narrative.

"Tito and the Birds" is a storybook come to life on screen that delivers important depictions of serious themes in the tumultuous world children today are growing up in. The children in the film are smart, brave, curious, compassionate and loyal in their quest to take down a manipulative institution run by malicious adults in order to save their city. While this is an extreme situation in a fantastical film, its core message about the dangers of fearmongering and mass hysteria is relevant for children growing up in today's political media landscape.